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# Intercultural Communicative Competence and Employability in the Languages Curriculum at the Open University UK

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## Abstract

In recent years, higher education in Great Britain has undergone considerable change, most markedly the increase in fees from about £9,000 for a BA degree to £27,000 in 2012 in England. This fee increase has led to more questioning of the benefits of university education and a stronger focus on whether the students' financing of their education achieves a return on investment. The increased earnings over a life time are estimated to range from £100,000 to £500,000 (Anderson) and, as repaying their student debt has become a major preoccupation for new graduates, employability has become a key theme in university publicity: "Enhance your employability" is a key message given to prospective students by the most popular degree course at the Open University, an open and distance higher education provider in the UK, rated 14<sup>th</sup> overall in a national league table for the employability of its graduates.

Research (for example Araújo et al.) has demonstrated that knowledge of a second language increases employability across Europe. The importance of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) for working in multicultural teams is widely acknowledged and recognised by employers (CBI 32, 49) and so is intercultural dialogue for social cohesion (CoE, *White Paper* 5). Degrees in modern languages, especially when they integrate the development of ICC, therefore present strong employability benefits.

This paper presents the approach the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the Open University in the UK has taken to integrate both employability and ICC skills in its curriculum and enhance the skills base of graduates and their chances of finding work in the national or international graduate workforce. We will describe the design principles and development of our detailed

framework and supporting resource—designed to span our entire modern languages programme, in five languages, from ab *initio* to degree level—and demonstrate how our innovative learning design implements the framework and supports the training of highly employable multilingual global citizens able to articulate the range of skills they have developed.

**Keywords:** distance education, languages, curriculum design, intercultural communicative competence, employability skills

## Context

Higher education in Great Britain has changed considerably over the last two decades, starting with the introduction of student fees in 1998, when students were required to pay up to £1,000 per year for tuition. Tuition fees have increased several times in the interim, and since 2012 a BA degree has costed about £27,000 in England (other arrangements exist in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland). Tuition fees have to be paid upfront every year, and student loans managed by private loans companies have therefore been introduced to enable students to afford such payments. With students undertaking a large investment in their higher education and also taking on a considerable debt which will also include loans for their living costs whilst at university, before they enter the job market, there has been an increasing focus on what benefits university education brings to graduates and also on whether students receive a return on their investment. Estimates about the increased earnings over a lifetime vary and range from £100,000 to £500,000 (Anderson). This context explains why universities have made employability and their graduates' employability skills a key theme to attract students which is reflected strongly in university publicity. The Open University, UK, an open and distance higher edu-

cation provider, which traditionally offered part-time degrees, advertises its most popular degree course with the slogan “Enhance your employability” (“BA/ BSc (Honours) open degree”). Rankings on graduate employment are widely available and used for advertising and promotion. In a league table published by *Times Higher Education* on 16 November 2016, the Open University is ranked 14th overall by employers in a national league table for the employability of its graduates (Minsky).

In the context of higher education in the UK, “our collective understanding of employability is pivotal to modern higher education delivery, but the underpinning concepts are not yet fully formed. The measures we use are blunt instruments, incapable of reflecting the nuances and complex realities of transitioning from education to work, not least in how we measure employability for part-time and distance learners” (Kellett and Clifton). It is stated that higher education “must either deliver increased earning potential (in which it is valuable to the student), or deliver increased ability to perform a social function and/or make an economic contribution (in which case it is valuable to the public good and a subsidy is demonstrably justified). Of course, it can deliver both” (Rich 6). The recent introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in England (Morgan), a formal scheme aiming to assess the quality of teaching in English universities, highlights the importance of employability skills as a measure of success for universities as it includes “employment” and “highly skilled employment” as part of their key metrics (Department of Education 27).

For the purpose of this article, employability is defined as “having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new em-

ployment, if required” (Hillage and Pollard, quoted in Rich 9). Kellett and Clifton (“Measuring gains”) stipulate that “the part-time sector must broaden its thinking from the narrowness of employment outcomes to a more nuanced clustering of plural gains: learning gain, working gain and personal gain. This embodies a more holistic fusion of skills, values and attitudes in employment journeys” (Kellett and Clifton). The design principles of the new curriculum designed by the Open University School of Languages and Applied Linguistics reflect a similar holistic view of what constitutes the learning and teaching of modern languages, redefining the discipline as a clustering of knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes spanning a plurality of areas.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a well-established academic field, originating from the work of Mike Byram and his collaborators in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see for example *Teaching-and-Learning* and *Teaching and Assessing*). Within a European context, Byram’s work (e.g. *Intercultural Competence* and *The Common European Framework of Reference. The Globalisation of Language Education Policy*) has been the benchmark for ICC since the late 1990s, demonstrating its influence by its inclusion as a key component in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CoE 197). In this article Byram’s definition of ICC is used, which consists of: “knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one’s belonging to a number of social groups, values which are part of one’s belonging to a given society” (*Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice* 5). Figure 1 shows the five component parts of ICC which are expressed as “savoirs” or “ways of knowing”.

Figure 1 – Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, *Teaching and Assessing* 34)

	<b>Skills</b> Interpret and relate ( <i>savoir comprendre</i> )	
<b>Knowledge</b> Of self and other; Of interaction: individual and societal ( <i>savoirs</i> )	<b>Education</b> Political education Critical cultural awareness ( <i>savoir s’engager</i> )	<b>Attitudes</b> Relativising self Valuing others ( <i>savoir être</i> )
	<b>Skills</b> Discover and/or interact ( <i>savoir apprendre/faire</i> )	

As Canning states, “Intercultural competence, defined by Byram et al. (2004), as ‘... the ability to interact in complex cultural contexts among people who embody more than one cultural identity and language’, has emerged as an interdisciplinary field which links disciplines such as ethnography, history, language, literature, philosophy and psychology (see Crawshaw, 2005). Interculturality acknowledges that language skills alone are insufficient for an understanding of complex cultural contexts. Therefore language graduates should possess in-depth cultural insights, which will be valued by employers, rather than being ‘only’ functionally competent in the language.” (8). Canning also writes that “employability is widely cited as a key reason to study a language” and adds that “more sophisticated analyses speak of the intercultural competence and communication skills developed by Modern Languages graduates and how these skills make them highly employable, even when the employer does not require languages.” (1).

Intercultural communicative competence means, according to Jones, the ability to operate “effectively across cultures and challenging our own values, assumptions and stereotypes” (Jones 97). In the literature, the focus is mainly on the experience of international sojourners, i.e. students who spent a period abroad studying or in work placements. Coleman (1) stated that there is strong evidence that a period of study or work abroad helps students to gain employability skills. Jones suggests that the main transferable employability skills gained by interculturally competent students are self-sufficiency/self-efficacy skills and people skills (Jones 101). Although Jones’ study was predominantly based on the context of languages students acquiring these skills during residence abroad, self-efficacy skills are skills that Open University students develop in abundance too. The combined benefits of distance study and modern languages study therefore make for a particularly favourable context for employability.

### **The Open University (UK) and Languages at the Institution**

The Open University (OU) was founded in 1969, it has been for several decades the main part-time distance education provider in the UK. It was

unique as it offered, and still offers, an open entry policy at undergraduate level, in that students can commence studying at the institution without any prior qualifications. In 2017 the Open University had over 170,000 students in the UK and beyond, with the majority of students being mature students. It has a modular programme with chunks of normally 300 or 600 hours of learning per academic year, worth 15 or 30 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) credits respectively. Curriculum design and production is normally done from scratch and entirely in-house. The institution has a strong commitment to opening education to all, and makes open educational resources (OERs) available to the general public through its OpenLearn platform which offers a large range of learning materials for free. The Open University also owns the FutureLearn platform which delivers Massive Open Online Courses across the world.

More than three quarter of OU students are in employment (“Facts and Figures”), which means that employability has a slightly different focus than for most universities that cater for the 18-24 year-old age group who will be entering the job market after the end of their academic study. Nevertheless, there is still a strong focus on employability at the Open University, in line with government policy and with the institution’s strong social mission, aiming to support students to gain employment, move to more qualified or senior positions or change career pathways, while or after studying with the institution. The importance of employability skills at the OU is reflected, for example, in the employability advice that is provided to languages students (“BA (Honours) Language Studies”). It explains that language skills are regarded highly in some sectors, such as manufacturing, banking, finance and insurance because of the increasing globalisation of these industries. It also provides a detailed list of specific skills the students will develop beyond the specific knowledge gained. The focus here is on transferable and work-related skills, such as the ability to draw together information, analyse and critically evaluate it, effective communication, time management, the ability to work independently, to understand contemporary global issues and appreciate cultural diversity.

The Open University's explicit "goal is nothing less than to make The Open University the premier university in the UK for enhancing employability and boosting career prospects" (The Open University 6). This goal is reached through the completion of qualifications developing subject specialist skills, and supported by a full career advice service, but it is also achieved through embedding employability skills into the curriculum. We will now describe how.

### **The Languages Curriculum at the Open University**

Languages were introduced into the curriculum of the university in 1995 when the first module, in French, was made available to students. Today, the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics offers undergraduate qualifications in a variety of combinations of English, French, German, and Spanish, with a main degree of a BA in Modern Languages and embedded Certificates of Higher Education and Diplomas of Higher Education. English for Academic Purposes, Chinese and Italian are also taught as minor subjects, and Welsh through a non-accredited course. At postgraduate level, students can also study an MA in Applied Linguistics and an MA in Translation. The School has been a pioneer in technology-enhanced language learning and teaching. Apart from qualifications it also offers opportunities for informal learning, including Massive Open Online Courses. In the 2016-17 academic year, about 11,000 students were enrolled to study on languages modules. The BA programme, by dint of being a programme of distance education, does not offer an extended period of study abroad. However, students will attend a week-long intensive course in the countries whose languages they are studying. Furthermore, as these students are older and as the majority of them is in employment (69% for Languages students), a large proportion of the cohort has experience of travelling, living or working abroad.

### **Redesigning the Languages Curriculum**

Historically the languages curriculum was developed on a module basis, with module syllabi cumulatively forming the overall curriculum. A comprehensive review of the curriculum was undertaken

after the institution moved to a qualification-based offering to comply with the practical requirements of the new fees regime and loans system in England. The review highlighted some issues in terms of the overall coherence of the BA degree, between stages of study or across languages, that needed to be addressed. This review also offered an opportunity to respond to market demand and institutional policy with regards to employability skills, embedding intercultural communicative competence further into the curriculum and adding the consistent development of non-subject specific skills to the curriculum.

The design process finished in 2014, after a comprehensive review which involved all academic colleagues in the School. An immediate result was the production of an introductory module on exploring languages and cultures to better prepare students for the study of language and introduce intercultural communicative competence into the curriculum. As the institution and the School have traditionally long lead-in times, the implementation of the new curriculum for the BA has been gradual since then and will continue until 2022 allowing for a full-cycle of module redesigns. The first modules to implement the new curriculum have been three specialist modules at OU Level 1 and CEFR level A2-B1 in French, German and Spanish. They will be launched in September 2017 as part of the degree programme. Other modules will follow until the redesign is completed.

It was important to reference the languages curriculum against existing internal and external benchmark so as to ensure its validity and compliance with quality assurance requirements. *The Common European Framework of Reference* (CoE) of Europe (2001), by now the established international benchmark in the UK higher education sector, had already been used for the first iteration of the curriculum design and was thus referred to again in its reincarnation. The Open University had developed a new internal levels framework, which was used as well as frameworks for digital literacy and professional skills developed based on available best practice in the sector. Finally, the curriculum was referenced against the important Quality Assuran-



ce Agency's benchmark statements for Languages, Cultures and Societies (QAA 2-3).

A main aim of the redesign of the curriculum was to highlight the multiplicity of the subject-specific

knowledge, competence and skills areas which cluster to make up the field of language study, including intercultural communication competence, and to foreground non-subject specific skills, i.e. academic, digital and employability skills.

Figure 2 – The different strands of the languages curriculum at the Open University



The review therefore identified twelve different components of a new and comprehensive languages curriculum. Apart from the traditional strands of content (themes), grammatical, lexical and phonological competence and language skills, knowledge of text types and translation skills, the curriculum also prominently includes non subject-specific skills: digital and information literacy to enable students to operate in our increasingly digital world at home and at work, academic literacy to enable students to acquire critical skills and produce work in appro-

prate academic language (both in English and the modern languages on offer), and employability and professional skills. Last but not least, our blueprint includes intercultural communicative competence. As Byram's framework stipulates that knowledge is one important aspect of ICC, knowledge of the world will also feature alongside ICC.

The article will now focus on showing how intercultural communicative competence and employability skills have been embedded in the curriculum.

Figure 3 – Learning outcomes on the BA qualification in relation to ICC

	Level 1 Introductory	Level 1 beginners	Level 1 intermediate	Level 2	Level 3
<b>ICC learning outcomes</b>	<p><i>Students should be able to develop and demonstrate...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ an awareness of how languages relate to the cultural contexts in which they are used</li> <li>▶ an awareness of culture-specific knowledge and how it relates to your own and other culture(s)</li> <li>▶ an awareness of the role that language plays in intercultural encounters, including English in its global contexts</li> <li>▶ an awareness of stereotypes associated with your own and other culture(s)</li> <li>▶ an awareness of what it means to be plurilingual</li> </ul>	<p><i>Students should be able to demonstrate...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ an awareness of and an ability to reflect on their own culture and how they are seen by others</li> <li>▶ an awareness of the role of languages as instrument for mediating culture(s)</li> <li>▶ a willingness to engage with members of other cultures through the medium of English</li> <li>▶ an ability to use non-verbal and paralinguistic behaviour for communication in intercultural encounters</li> </ul>	<p><i>Students should be able to demonstrate...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ an ability to reflect on their own culture(s) and on at least one other culture</li> <li>▶ a willingness to engage with others (increasingly in the target language(s))</li> <li>▶ an awareness of how cultural meaning is constructed through language</li> <li>▶ an awareness of commonly held stereotypes about their own and other culture(s)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Students should be able to demonstrate...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ a high level of ability to reflect on one's own and on other cultures</li> <li>▶ an ability to understand and critically reflect upon stereotypes in your own and other cultures</li> <li>▶ a demonstrable ability to engage and interact with others in the target language(s)</li> <li>▶ an ability to resolve misunderstandings at a basic level in the target language(s)</li> <li>▶ an ability to evaluate critically some resources from other culture(s) which deal with cultural differences and similarities</li> </ul>	<p><i>Students should be able to demonstrate...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ an ability to demonstrate critical understanding of the cultures and societies associated with their own and their target languages</li> <li>▶ a high level of ability to engage and interact with others in the target languages on a wide variety of topics</li> <li>▶ an ability to evaluate critically sources from the other cultures which deal with cultural differences and similarities</li> <li>▶ an ability to mediate between different standpoints/perspectives across culture(s)</li> </ul>

Figure 3 provides a detailed breakdown of all the learning outcomes in relation to ICC in the BA (Honours) Language Studies qualification. At the introductory level, the focus is broad and includes *inter alia* the development of awareness of the interrelatedness between languages and cultural contexts, culture-specific knowledge, intercultural encounters, awareness of stereotypes and the meaning of plurilingualism. Within Level 1 (roughly equivalent of the first year of study), there are two stages, related to the level of linguistic proficiency: beginners and post-beginners, followed by Level 2 (equivalent of the second year of degree study) and Level 3 (equivalent of final year degree study). The

learning outcomes of the different levels build on each other so that through the course of study the students gain a more sophisticated understanding of ICC. The curriculum also acknowledges that at beginners' level, the students' linguistic proficiency will not be sufficient to engage with speakers of the language in the target language whereas this skill will be developed at the next level and students will gradually develop a level of sophistication to do so in the target language as they progress through level 2 and level 3. The development of criticality and the increasing reflection on stereotypes are two further main learning outcomes.

Figure 4 – Knowledge of the World: main principles

	Level 1 Introductory	Level 1 Beginners	Level 1 Intermediate	Level 2	Level 3
<b>Knowledge of the world</b>  <b>MAIN PRINCIPLES</b>	At this level, learners would be expected to reflect on their own culture and language biography: ► language as culture ► intercultural encounters ► exploring intercultural communication around them ► plurilingual and pluricultural biographies	At this level, learners would be expected to gain... ► outline knowledge of at least one country / culture / region where the target language is spoken	Building on the knowledge gained at beginners' level, at this level, learners would be expected to gain... ► more specialised knowledge of at least one country / culture / region where the target language is spoken, and ► outline knowledge of further countries / cultures / regions where the target language is spoken	Building on the knowledge gained at beginners and intermediate level, at this level learners would be expected to gain... ► in-depth knowledge of aspects of the countries / cultures / regions where the target language is spoken	Building on the knowledge gained at Level 1 and Level 2, at this level, learners would be expected to gain... ► comprehensive knowledge of aspects of countries / cultures / regions in which the target language is spoken

The strand on knowledge of the world is split into two aspects, the general underpinning principles, and details of the content for each level. Figure 4 shows the underlying principles on which the curriculum is designed. In line with the entire shape of the curriculum, the students are provided with a generic introduction at Level 1, covering aspects such as the students' own culture and language biography, intercultural encounters, intercultural communication around the students own community and areas of plurilingualism and pluri-culturalism. The students will then gradually develop their knowledge of the countries and cultures where the target language is spoken from Level 1 to Level 3, and will gradually widen the geographical scope of their knowledge.

The employability and professional skills framework details skills to be developed in a range of areas: personal management (e.g. planning and organization or self-motivation), communication (i.e. oral and written communication skills that students will gradually gain in at least two languages, including cross-referenced skills in intercultural communicative competence), IT (cross-referenced to digital skills), team working (including working with others, leadership, negotiating and networking) and problem-solving (e.g. being analytical and critical, cross-referenced to academic skills).

To support the authors of the teaching materials a detailed checklist that breaks down the skills to be taught and achieved by the students has been provided (see Figure 5 for an example of one skill).

Figure 5 – Professional and employability skills Level 1 checklist (excerpt)

Competence areas	Skills	Activities to demonstrate skills
Team working	Develop ability to work creatively and flexibly with others as part of a team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with peers in synchronous tutorials on gap fill and other types of tasks</li> <li>• Collaborative tasks with peers through online forum</li> <li>• Give / receive support to peers through online forums</li> <li>• Collaborate in self-help groups as moderators and / or as participants</li> </ul>



## Implementation

Having developed the whole framework described above, as well as resources for course designers to support module development, like the checklist shown

In Figure 5, the School has now moved into the implementation phase, with teams of academics currently developing new modules applying the new curriculum. Designing or updating modules to reflect this new curriculum requires a change of learning design and teaching approach, which we will now describe.

Producing languages modules for distance teaching is a complex process (Coleman and Vialleton 235-236), but the methods and approaches used by the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the Open University are, by now, tried and tested. However, developing a new generation of modules, which cover the same level of linguistic skills as their predecessors, but teaches some new non-subject specific skills and foregrounds others, whilst not increasing the quantity of materials or the student workload, required some adjustments.

The key to this challenge was the notion of integration: the choice of content, the design of module units and activities, and teaching approach needed to allow the module designers to do more within the same time and space. The following will demonstrate how this was achieved, based on the example of one of the new modules designed: the new module French Studies 1, Language and Culture of the French-speaking world.

Firstly, the content was carefully selected to support the implementation of the new curriculum. The documents and stimuli on which activities are based were selected or designed to be multi-dimensional, and therefore support activities leading to the simultaneous development of a range of skills.

The audio-visual materials, produced in-house, were designed not just to provide input for listening and listening activities, but to support further activities and reflections. For example, the participants in the videos were chosen to reflect the students' career aspirations. In the unit about the world of

work, the learners hear an interpreter and a teacher from French-speaking countries talk about their jobs, the qualities required to be successful in their professions, and the study pathways these individuals followed to enter their careers. The videos also feature people with language skills who are working in professions not traditionally associated with languages graduates (i.e. a nurse and a shop keeper), life-long learners who changed career pathways and retrained, and individuals who work in multilingual and multicultural environments (the interpreter, working in European institutions in Brussels, and the employee of a hospital in Geneva).

Thus, the audio-visual materials covered not only language and skills development but allowed the addition of a layer of reflective activities for our students on study aims and career choices and what intercultural communicative competence means in a "real life environment", thus supporting the aim of including employability skills and intercultural communicative competence in the curriculum.

Secondly, the structure of units and teaching approach in the module was also revised to allow for the integration of new curriculum areas. Within the module, each theme embeds the development of knowledge of the world which comprises, amongst other, geography, arts and culture and history. Furthermore each unit progresses from introductory level facts and vocabulary to language development (including functional language, grammatical, lexical and phonological competence), to culture and intercultural communicative competence. For each theme, the structure of units has been designed to operate a gradual change in perspective from the personal (developing the students' language skills for daily life) to the societal (developing more in-depth understanding of cultures). For example, the unit on celebrations and traditions moves from talking about how Saint Nicholas, Christmas or Candlemas are celebrated in French-speaking parts of Europe, to finding out about and reflecting on the status of religion and secularism in French society today. The unit on leisure and culture starts with talking about popular hobbies and ends with a cultural exploration of Brussels and of Belgian architecture and art and their importance in the identity of the

population. The module also evolves from guided discovery of a theme to more independent exploration through online resources (which supports the development, amongst other, of digital skills and problem solving skills), and contains a combination of guided and basic production tasks in the target language and some reflective activities in English on more sophisticated cultural notions. The module also includes the introduction of task-based and collaborative activities to develop the learners' communication and professional skills, such as team work or providing feedback to others.

The students are also exposed to basic translation skills and reflections on the cultural dimensions of languages. For example, in the French module, students will reflect on how to translate culture-specific references such as the "Guy Fawkes' night", a celebration specific to British culture, into French. The activity is an opportunity to think about how culture is mediated through language, and simultaneously introduces translation concepts such as equivalence, substitution or loan words.

Finally, an important aspect of our approach to im-

plementing the new curriculum and embedding intercultural communication skills and employability was to make it explicit for students. An important part of enhancing the employability of students is to enable them to be able to articulate the variety of skills, knowledge, competences and values that they have developed through their higher education studies. As most of our students will not end up working in a field directly related to languages, to gain employment or promotion, it is crucial that they can demonstrate and talk about the numerous non-subject specific skills that studying languages at the Open University will have allowed them to develop. These must therefore be signposted throughout the learning materials so that students become conscious of them. In the module, this is done at two levels, in activities and at the end of each unit. Throughout the activities, the teaching text (the Open University's trademark "teaching in print") signals the different skills dimensions. For example, in the following, the activity introduction clearly makes a link between the lexical and functional area covered (talking about approximations) and professional communication:

Figure 6 – Example of link between lexical/functional competence and professional communication

### Étape C

**Here you will work on the language from the text in *Étape A* that is used to present figures and data. This is useful vocabulary to know especially if you ever use your French in a professional context.**

Select the seven words or phrases from the list below that are used in the text to introduce an approximation or an estimate.

*Trouvez dans la liste les sept expressions du texte utilisées pour parler d'une approximation.*

a augmenté de  
à peu près  
approximativement  
autour de  
depuis  
environ  
est estimée à [...]

## Conclusion

The article set out to show the redesign of an entire BA Modern Languages curriculum at an online and distance education institution and how to widen it through the introduction of additional non-subject specific skills that benefit the students. It has provided the policy context for the increased focus in the curriculum on intercultural communicative competence and employability and shown how the

School of Languages and Applied Linguistics has responded to this. The article has also demonstrated how intercultural communicative competence is playing a key role in the new curriculum and how it is integrated into it. It has furthermore shown that employability and skills for employment can be integrated into such a curriculum and that it is both possible and feasible to add these important areas into a degree programme in Modern Languages.

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